The Black Cat

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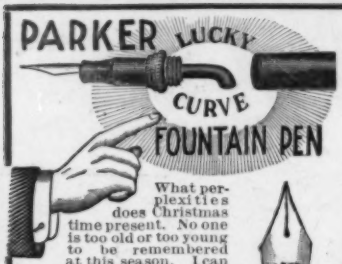
PARKER LUCKY CURVE FOUNTAIN PEN



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Fox's Free Laundry.*

BY HARRY IRVINE GREENE.

FOX hired the place because he is a crank. He is entirely unlike the common herd that eat by rule, swear by note, and sleep just because the sun does. For breakfast he always has soup and ice cream, for his lunch nuts, for dinner eggs on toast and breakfast food. When he swears he does not yell out the old standard formulæ for profanity, but instead speaks gently, beseechingly and originally, so that those who hear his voice and not his words think he is blessing them. As for sleeping simply because it is night, he considers that merely a fad. He always gets to bed at eight o'clock in the morning, rises at six in the evening, and says he feels better for it. Instead of having his life insured, paying the insurance company continually and never getting anything out of it until he is dead and doesn't need it, he makes a wager every day with his friend Cobb, of twenty thousand dollars to five that he will live for the ensuing twenty-four hours. He has always won, and in that way gets enough out of Cobb to live on. When he finally loses, he says he won't mind, and Cobb will suddenly have enough to go to raising poultry, which is his greatest ambition.

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But about the house. It had once been a vain place, with four lightning rods, a kennel, a summer kitchen and a laundry, but the kennel had gone to the dogs, the rods were eaten to the core with hungry rust, and the kitchen and laundry had been boarded up and padlocked so long that the memory of man runneth not to the contrary. Years before, a sign upon the front of the house had made the following affirmation:

E. GONDE
THIS PROPERTY
TO SELL

but Time had kept rubbing away at it whenever there was nothing else to do, and on the day Fox entered the premises to take possession, the dim board bore merely the following:

GON E
P OP
TO ELL

and so Fox knocked the senseless thing down with the head of a hatchet and chopped it into kindling. The outside walls were blistered by the sun, the gate squalled if one even looked at it, and the lawn badly needed a hair-cut. But Fox liked the place all the better for those reasons, and when his furniture came he put the cook stove in the parlor, the organ in the bathroom, and fixed for himself a cozy chamber in the kitchen. Then he was ready to begin housekeeping.

He rose promptly at six o'clock in the evening of the second day, ate his breakfast and, taking a chair, went out and propped it against the laundry to superintend the rising of the moon. This function called for the accompaniment of a quiet smoke, and drawing a cigar from his pocket and lighting the butt, Fox placed the other end in his mouth and began to enjoy it. You probably have no idea, he says, how much better a cigar tastes when smoked

in that manner. While he was wondering why people will insist upon burning them the other way the moon — round, yellow, and looking like the bottom of a burnished copper kettle — arose and started west as fast as she could go. Fox sat watching her until she got over his head and he was left in the shadow of the building and then — a very unusual thing for him at that hour — he grew drowsy. For a while longer, nevertheless, he sat with eyes half open watching a thin-winged bat that came whirring about his head in sudden circles, remarking what strange shapes night gave to the currant bushes, wondering if that thing were a skull or only a piece of punk that glowered at him from beneath them, and then went to sleep.

When he awoke he knew it was late, but no more. Fox has been up so much between sunset and sunrise that ordinarily he can tell the time o' night as closely as a farmer can decide that it is dinner time by a squint at the sky. But now, as he looked around, moon and stars had vanished, and it was as black as the wing of a crow. This was because a curtain of clouds had drawn itself across the sky, and so thick were they that not a star could find a crack to put its eye to. The night wind, too, feeling very bad about something, had come from his haunts in nowhere, and was sobbing around the corners, making the sympathetic ash whimper and the tender rose bushes shed a few dewy tears, while from the back of the barn an owl was hooting direfully. Beneath the bushes that evil, skull-like thing still glowered and glowered, from out the darkness a blundering night beetle came and struck him in the face, and at his back something — he thought it was a branch — from time to time swished across the wall like a lashing tail. But at all this a great happiness came over him, for he knows no sweeter music than the sobbing of the belated breeze or the voice of the midnight owl, and as for that thing of glowing eyes and teeth, it was positively fascinating. Then when, a moment later, a damp tree toad fell into his lap from above and he took its cold body in his hand, his happiness became supreme. How it is that people can profess to like hot sunlight, cackling hens and warm, fuzzy kittens, is more than he can comprehend. Personally, he has always believed that they are hypocrites, who only pretend to like such things, because they are fads.

So as he sat, peering about that nothing might escape his eyes, and with his ears set to catch the slightest noise, of a sudden from behind him and inside the laundry came most entrancing sounds! First, there was a series of low swishes, like a snake crawling across leaves, and after that a long, soul-felt, quivering sigh. Deeply interested at once, he dropped the poor, chilled toad into his coat pocket to keep it warm, and, pressing his ear against the clapboards, listened with dilated eyes to the sounds that came from within. For a time all was silence; then they came again, and with them a moaning and groaning, a clank and a rattle, the low scuffling of feet, whispers, gibberish — another sigh. Unable to restrain himself longer Fox arose, gently fitted the key to the rusty lock and stepped within, closing the door behind him.

Inside it was as black as the ultimate cavern of the Pit. Not the ghost of a glimmer stole through a crack, not the dimmest glow through a nail-hole, and when he shut his eyes, as he soon did, it but seemed the lighter. Motionless he stood, listening, expectant, but the sullen silence was that of a place where death alone lived. Patiently he waited, however, while minute after minute crawled away, until finally, hearing nothing, and knowing something of the habits of things of darkness, he sighed. Joy! From the opposite corner it was answered. He sobbed. At his side it was repeated. He gibbered. From behind his back gibberish answered him. Then he sat down upon the floor.

Instantly unseen activity filled the room. Again the scuffling of feet, the sighing and clanking, the sobs, the gibberish. Waiting till it was at its height, he gathered together a handful of matches, struck them all at once, and as they flared up and exposed the room to its uttermost recesses, he looked about eagerly. No living or moving thing greeted his sight. A broken chair or two, some warped wooden tubs, a rusty boiler, a melancholy ruin of a clothes wringer — only that and nothing more. Then the disappointed matches went out in a huff, and as their last flicker died away there came again the moans and clanks and gibberish. Fox was surprised.

Persistently, determinedly, all night long he sat there listening — listening to those uncanny sounds within, and the sobbing wind and slatting sheets of rain without. From the depths of his

pocket the tree toad set up a merry croaking, from above drops of water fell with a monotonous drip, drip, drip upon his head, and more than once the swishing feet of the other occupant passed close to him and his face was swept by its filmy garments. Yet when he, quick as a cat, caught at it, it melted in his grasp like a clutched handful of water. Then, just before the sun sat up in bed and thrust one red eye above the rim of the world, the clouds dried their eyes, the wind died with a gasp, and within the room was nothing but a throbbing silence. At this Fox threw open the door and by the morning light scanned the room anew.

Chairs, tubs, boiler and wringer were undisturbed, and he could discover nothing that he had not seen by the flaring light of the matches, except that the walls had been covered with an oxide of chrome yellow, evidently intended to be but an under-coating, yet which, for some reason, had never received a covering.

Much perplexed by the mystery, but fully determined to meet his suffering tenant face to face, Fox went for an electrician, who put a big arc light in the centre of the ceiling and a push-button on the wall. Then, when night again settled over the world with broad pinions spread, he took his chair into the room and patiently sat the night through, hearing not so much as the echo of a groan to cheer him. And for the four succeeding nights he sat in similar unhappiness, but on the fifth — just one week from the first occurrence, a Monday — the ghost came again, and for an hour they groaned and sobbed in unseen comradeship. Then, just at one o'clock — as a rooster crew, a cat squalled, the toads croaked, and the clanking reached its height — Fox, feeling a hang-dog shame at his treachery, pushed the button and the room was instantly a-dazzle with light. Eagerly he swept his gaze around.

Agile as the electric current was, the ghost was quicker. Already it had vanished, riding upon the last departing shadow, but, as Fox had been careful to lock the door, and the windows were boarded up, great was his wonder as to where it had gone. Scarcely believing his eyes, he went around and around the room, peering beneath the tubs, looking into every crack, feeling in his pockets; but, although more than once he thought he heard the scuff of soft feet, no other trace of a visitor could he detect by eyes, ears or nose. At last, realizing that he was thoroughly out-

spooked, he turned off the light and went out, locking the door after him.

The next morning Fox visited his friend Hume, who is a scientist, a hypnotist, a spiritualist, and an egotist. Hume listened patiently, while a soul-maddening smile of self-sufficiency came creeping out of the corners of his mouth and spread and spread until his face was thickly plastered with it, and Fox felt that he would gladly pay all his friend's funeral expenses for the exhilarating joy of attending it. Then, by a chain of promises, he led him to the laundry, where Hume looked about, made Fox repeat some of the gibberish he had heard, and then coolly asked him if he wished to see the gibberer. When asked what he thought he was hired for, he merely smirked, and said that nothing would be easier, for a person of some intelligence, to arrange. At that he sent for a white-washer, who soon came and made the yellow walls as white as spotless linen, after which the medium patted Fox on the head patronizingly and, saying that he would come again on the following Monday night, went away, leaving Fox looking for stones to throw.

All the rest of that week Fox kept midnight vigil in vain — sighing, groaning, clanking bits of iron, using all his coaxing wiles — desperate because he could not conjure forth a response, and so forestall the spiritualist, whom he silently called an idiot, and had always secretly despised. On Monday evening he came, serene and exasperating, and promptly at midnight the sounds began. Scarcely had the first clank come to their ears when the medium was upon his feet.

"I thought so," said he, coolly, "It is really the simplest case I have ever had." And with that he turned on the light.

Wild with rage at his insulting tones, Fox looked about, rubbing his eyes and blinking like a bat that flies into a lighted parlor. For a few seconds he saw nothing, and was about to shriek at Hume in triumph and scorn, when his gaze fell upon the farthest corner, and he stood transfixed, staring, with a mouth into which one might have thrust a plum. For in the corner cowered a dimly visible form, clothed in a misty chrome yellow garment that covered it to its sandaled feet and left no portion of its body exposed except its long, transparent, yellow hands.

Then the medium turned out the light. "Come, boy," said he, and he took the arm of Fox, who in a stupor allowed himself to be led away.

"Well," said he, bitterly, about an hour afterward. "Somehow, in some way, it seems, you happened to blunder upon a means of exposing him. I had a better plan myself, but out of courtesy let you try first, and of course, bullhead luck and ignorance came running to your aid, as usual. But what was your silly theory, anyway?"

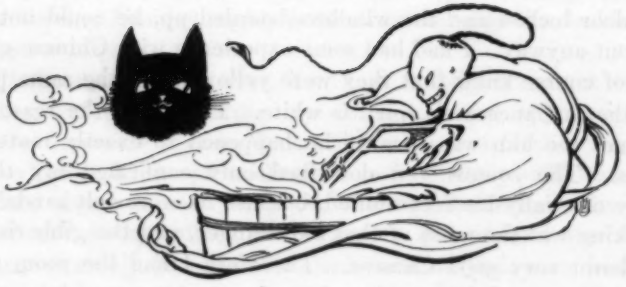
Hume yawned exasperatingly. "When you first told me about it I remembered that a Chinaman died in that place on a Monday, years ago, while rubbing at his tub. Naturally, then, it was his ghost. When you told me of his being quicker than the electric light I only smiled in secret behind my hand, for there is no fact better known among us scientific mediums than that electricity is fully thirty per cent. quicker than the most acrobatic ghost. However, that has nothing to do with the case, since, as you had the door locked and the windows boarded up, he could not have got out anyway. I had had some experience with Chinese ghosts, and of course knew that they were yellow, upon the same principle that a Caucasian's spirit is white. Therefore, the reason you did not see him was because he happened to exactly match the walls. The sounds you described only confirmed my theory. Very naturally his feet scuffed, because he wore felt sandals, the clanking was the noise of that old wringer, and the gibberish was no doubt very good Chinese. Therefore I had the room whitewashed, and of course the ghost became, to a certain extent, visible against that colorless background. I only charge $10 in these rudimental cases."

"You think you are very smart," said Fox. "You can sue me for it. If you can produce the ghost in court I will pay you your bill."

Then Hume departed, fuming.

But Fox got to thinking about it, and the result was that he hunted up a live Chinaman, told him the story, and quoted some of the gibberish from memory. At once the laundryman's face grew intelligent. "Chinaman ghost askee for laundree," said he. "Muchee worry because no washee-washee."

And so, acting upon the hint, Fox equipped the laundry with soap and water, a new wringer and a basket of soiled linen, and now, on Monday nights, as he sits outside and smokes the wrong end of his cigar, from within there comes, not the sound of grief and the clank of rusty machinery, but instead a low, contented chant of Chinaland and the purr of a brand-new wringer. At the same time, he gets his laundry work done for nothing.



The Patent Envelope.*

BY HENRY GARDNER HUNTING.

IF Jack Redmond had been told, at four and twenty, that happiness, and particularly his happiness, would ever be dependent upon so little a thing as an insignificant piece of steel wire about five inches long and so fine that its other dimension runs too deeply into the fractions of an inch to be stated, he would have laughed his informant to scorn. He was the sort of a man who believed that his happiness depended upon himself and that he was strong enough to defy most circumstances and to secure for himself those things which were essential for his contentment. The one circumstance upon which Redmond had not calculated, however, was the very one which finally brought acknowledgment from him of the extraordinary power of little things outside himself, and the suddenness with which it came jarred him. Harriet Brice refused him.

Miss Brice was a tall girl with hair the color of oak leaves in the late fall and eyes to match, deep red-brown, and the eyes had a light in them to win or wring a man's heart. Redmond loved her. That was a cause for happiness to him and one of the reasons why he was so sure of himself and of things. When she refused him it naturally took some of his assurance from him and some of his buoyancy and life, too.

It isn't necessary to relate why Miss Brice turned Jack Redmond down when she did. It had looked to people — and to Jack — as if she cared a little more for him than for most other men, but she did not appear to care enough to marry him, and that ended it for Jack. He had spent a long vacation at her side in a winter resort in the South. When his hope of happiness received its damper he went back to Chicago and his business, the prosaic, though profitable, occupation of a commission merchant.

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* The writer of this story received a cash prize of $125 in THE BLACK CAT story contest ending February 26, 1902.

As for Miss Harriet, she did not seem to find the Southern resort amusing long after Redmond had left, and so she went North, too. Her home was in Ann Arbor, Mich., where her people were living while Harriet's younger brother pursued studies in Michigan's university. Ann Arbor is a good two hundred and forty miles from Chicago.

Miss Brice had spent a gay winter. Indeed, most of her time was always very full of pleasure and happiness, as was natural to a young woman who had seen but two winters in society. But on her way to the Northern home this condition of mind did not continue. The gray clouds which hung in the April sky of Ohio and of Michigan seemed to make her forget the color of Southern sunshine. There were some things, too, which she would like to forget — or thought she would — which were persistent in monopolizing her thoughts.

There was the fragrance of the jasmine — not that she did not like the jasmine, for she was fond of it — but it had been Redmond's favorite, too, and she thought of him when she thought of the jasmine flowers. So she did not wish to remember the jasmine — or thought she didn't. Then there was the recollection of exciting rides and of a strong hand under her foot as she sprang into the saddle, which came back without cause or excuse. There was the sparkle of confident eyes which had looked into hers, so confident that she had resented it while she liked it. And lastly, there was the paleness under the sunburn on Jack Redmond's cheek when she had said no to his eager question. And that least pleasant memory was the hardest to put away.

Miss Brice was a girl of sense. If she had been sentimental, probably the romance which seemed now to have come to so blank an end would have been cherished longer by her. With her it had been simply a matter of believing that she did not care enough for Jack Redmond to marry him. She liked him very much — very much, she admitted to herself. It had been pleasant to have his attention and, yes, his devotion. She recognized now that she should miss him. She did not like to think that. She did not care to think that any man was essential to her happiness, and yet — she wondered why she remembered him so much more distinctly than the others.

Redmond was a big fellow. He was jolly, full of life and heartiness. He could find fun everywhere and good in everything. His fun never had a sting in it for any one and his sympathy was broad enough for all. How jolly he was to every one he met. How the Southern people seemed to like him. How the guests chose him among the first when making up excursions from the beach hotel, and how the servants were always at his call. Then he had a serious side, too. She liked that rather best, though his fun and good humor were so delightful. She enjoyed the grave steadiness of his look when he talked of things he cared for and of things which she suggested. She liked the respect which he accorded her preferences, her opinions and even her whims. She liked his decisive replies to questions and his reserve on subjects of controversy. She liked Redmond — no doubt of that. But she did not love him. Of that she was positive — or thought she was.

The train which bore Miss Brice toward home in the afternoon of the second day was delayed in one of the northern Ohio towns. A freight was stalled ahead and a long wait resulted. The girl sat at the window of the coach and looked out steadily at the not enchanting view. A water-tank, a bit of village street and the great blank side of a newly-built frame hotel were for the better part of two long hours all that lay before her eyes.

More than one person in the car looked often at the sweet-faced young traveller who seemed to find such absorbing interest in the blank outlook. But their glances did not disturb her, for what Miss Brice saw was not bare clapboards with a single coat of white paint upon them, but green woods and mountain sides and hilly roads, and a tall young man with very broad shoulders who sat his horse erect and smiled at her in jolly comradery. How they did ride those wooded roads and mountain sides! How they had raced on old Thorn Ridge, and how they had sat, too, on the high bank of Colron Lake and watched the sunsets — the glorious sunsets back of Cherry Valley! She had loved those times. It was wonderful what good times they had been — and how dull the present.

When the train started north again it brought recollection of the present with a sudden jolt, but Miss Brice, after a hasty look about her, returned to her watch of outside scenery. As she swept north-

ward the gray clouds drew together and evening shadows commenced to creep over the landscape. When the Michigan line was crossed the sun had set. The train stopped at a little station where a bell rang to announce supper to hungry travellers, but Miss Brice was not thinking of supper.

There was something desolate to her about that quiet evening hour, despite the freshness of spring in the air. There was something in the fading light which suggested hopelessness. And there was something in the home life to which she was going back which now looked desolate and hopeless, too. It was this home life, so free, so comfortable, so happy, of which she had thought when Jack Redmond had asked her to leave it for him, and it was to it that she had clung with such unwillingness to give it up. It had suddenly lost its charm. Why was it? she asked herself. Was it the gay winter that had made a quiet summer at home appear so dull in prospect? That could not be, for she had been glad to get away from the resort where all the gay times had passed and, in retrospect, it was not the place that attracted her. Could it be — was it — but she would not ask herself the question.

She leaned her face upon her hand. It was burning hot and her heart was beating with a strange, swift beat. Could it be? Did she love Jack Redmond after all? Her eyes turned from the down-settling night for another swift look about the car. Had they guessed her thoughts? No, no one was looking. She turned to the night again and faced her question. Is it true? Her head sank slowly down till her forehead touched the cool glass of the window and the hot tears slowly welled up in her eyes while her throat was full and parched. The hand with which she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes trembled. She knew.

"Ann Arbor! Change for Detroit, Jackson, Kalamazoo and Chicago!" shouted the brakeman as the train swept at last into the home station. Miss Brice took up her little grip and left the car. On the platform she met her brother affectionately and then drove home with him in quiet, glad that he was such an unobservant boy. Mr. and Mrs. Brice were not at home. They were in the East, where Mrs. Brice had accompanied her husband on a business trip. Harold, the younger brother, had been keeping bachelor hall with only the cook and the man of all work to look

after his wants. Miss Brice welcomed the thought of being alone, but she wished that her maid, now visiting in her home town of Chelsea, a few miles away, were with her. For this reason it pleased her that the girl had anticipated this want to the extent of writing that she would come at once if wanted. Miss Brice read the letter, and though she was not a selfish person, and did not wish to shorten Marie's vacation time, she did want the girl. So it was that, after debating the matter, she wrote a brief message and sent it by Harold to the telegraph office.

"Come to me at once, if convenient," was how the message read. It was characteristic of Miss Brice, this consideration for her maid.

. . . . . .

Mr. Jack Redmond sat up from his big arm chair in his bachelor quarters in a Chicago apartment house and rubbed his eyes. He had been asleep and dreaming. It had been a pleasant dream — something about mountains and long vistas of dirt roads through overarching trees as they look from a horse's back, and there lingered with him a consciousness that he had been enjoying the scenery and the air — enjoying them very much indeed because some one else who seemed to have been with him had been enjoying them also. He came back to consciousness with a sense of cold desolateness surrounding him despite the fire on the hearth and the goodly physical comforts around him. The consciousness that it had been only a dream struck a quick chill to his heart and as he sat up to answer the knock at his door which had aroused him his face settled into lines which had been strange to it two weeks before.

"A telegram for you, sir," said the hall-boy respectfully, and Redmond took the message in and back to the fire to read it. He pulled the little wire which stripped the envelope open, and held the yellow sheet to the light.

MR. JOHN REDMOND,
Blank Street, Chicago.
Come to me at once, if convenient.
HARRIET BRICE.

Redmond stared at the sheet in amazement. Was he still dreaming, then? He read it again. No, there was the message, clear and cold, in a clean-cut, round hand. He looked again at the ad-

dress. It was for him, all straight enough. Yet it was inconceivable, incomprehensible. He turned the electric switch beside the mantel and the incandescents flashed up. He held the telegram in both hands tremblingly and read it again in the strong light. There was no mistake. He was awake and there in his hands lay the message which five minutes before even his dreaming brain could not have conceived.

Redmond was not an excitable nor a foolish fellow, but he was a very human and very much alive young man, and so what he did next with that bit of yellow paper it isn't necessary to relate. It is enough to say that it had suddenly grown precious to him.

It was too late for the midnight train. His watch told him that, and the next train would leave at half-past seven in the morning. He was not cool. He was grandly, gloriously excited, but he was clear-headed enough to pack a small grip and dress properly. Then he read the message again.

"If convenient," he muttered, repeating the last words. "If convenient! Ye gods!"

. . . . . .

Miss Brice's maid had not reached her mistress at five in the afternoon following the latter's return to her home. Harriet was mildly surprised at this, but looked for a letter of explanation. She did not go out and no one had come to the house. Harold had been away most of the day and she was alone.

The sound of the door-bell mingled with the chime of the little clock on the mantel in her room as it struck the hour and she was not sure at first that she had heard a ring. Then she stepped to the stairs and looked down. Yes, there was a shadow against the glass. It must be Marie returning. She ran lightly down and opened the door. She was sure it was Marie, though it seemed odd that the maid had not used her key.

A tall young man with very broad shoulders stood in the porch. He was taking off his hat with a grave smile and looking at her expectantly. It was Jack Redmond!

Harriet Brice was a well-bred girl, usually self-possessed and strong in a gentle dignity of manner, proof against ordinary jars and surprises, but for the moment her self-possession deserted her. She stared, literally.

"Mr. Redmond," she mananged to say after what seemed to her in looking back upon it an almost interminable pause.

Jack was smiling his strong, confident smile and he took her tardily proffered hand and pressed it, ever so lightly.

"I am so glad to see you," she said in what she meant to be a conventional manner as she ushered him into the library. She wondered if her voice shook. She was trembling. It was so sudden, this invasion of her stronghold by this great fellow, whose errand she could only guess.

"I am glad to be here," said Jack simply. To him her welcome for some reason did not seem cold.

She turned and looked at him and her eyes were full of a wonderful light. She little knew that happiness in his presence was written in them as plainly as man could ask. And Redmond saw. His heart leaped with a great bound.

"Harriet," he said, with instant, swift, uncontrollable impulse. "I cannot help it," he added quickly; "you have let me see you again. Is it that — is it —? May I hope now? Will you forgive me for speaking so? I am so selfish, but it means so much to me."

He advanced a step toward her. The girl looked at him, half frightened but helpless. She strove to control her beating heart and her speechless lips, but her eyes were brimming with tears and she could not stop him. She was silent.

"Harriet," cried Jack. He came swiftly now and caught her hands. "I love you. Oh, dear girl, I love you. Can you not tell me that I have a chance?"

The girl's face was dyed with the rich color. "Oh, Jack," she cried, "don't. It isn't fair. You are — you —" She covered her face with her hands.

If Redmond had been less of a man he might have stopped in consideration of her agitation, but he was a whole man with a boundless love for the girl before him. He did not draw back. He put his arms about her and drew her to him, and then he held her close.

Time is nothing to lovers. It might have been a half hour — it might have been an hour — after Jack's arrival, before it came — the explanation. But it followed on a remark of Jack's, of course.

"And to think," he said contentedly, while he watched her adjust a wayward coil of hair, "to think that I should probably have been in New York to-night — for I was intending to go East to-day — but for your message. I —"

"My message! What message? Why, Jack, what do you mean?"

Redmond looked at her in wonder. "Why, your telegram — the wire you sent me."

"Telegram! I sent you no telegram."

Jack stared again. "No telegram? Why, what — what do you call this?" He pulled the precious dispatch from his pocket and looked at it hesitatingly with a sudden lack of confidence. She took it from him and read it quickly.

"Jack Redmond!" she exclaimed. "That message? That's — that's the message I sent — why, yes, the message I sent to my maid." She gazed at him with sudden suspicion and then examined the yellow sheet again. "But it's addressed to you," she exclaimed, astonished. "I never — oh, Jack, I didn't. You didn't think I sent for you?"

Redmond returned her look, puzzled. "I sure did," he said simply. "It looks like it. It certainly reads that way."

It certainly did. To her it was amazing; to him incomprehensible. Then she told him her story, the story of Marie and the summons home, and then they tried to understand it, to solve the riddle. But they couldn't. Redmond evolved a theory, but he was too gallant to advance it — yet. He was not conceited enough to believe that thought of him had monopolized her mind to such an extent. He had known girls, and men too, absent-mindedly to write their thoughts rather than some other thing that was intended.

They did not solve it, but their happiness was not dampened for that.

When Redmond left the Brice home it was evening. He was the possessor of a happiness bigger than any other he had ever known. Because it was so big and because he was so sure in it there was room left for a little curiosity and that curiosity led him straight to the office of the telegraph company. It so happened that for Redmond's purpose he arrived at the office at the right moment.

The wire chief from Detroit was within and he and the local operator were discussing a matter which interested them greatly. So deeply were they engaged, indeed, that they did not cease their talk at once on his entrance.

"Most curious thing I ever saw," the wire chief was saying. "You see the envelope lay directly across the two keys at Whittemore, and switched the message so that this young woman did not get it, and the telegram that was intended for her went to the man in Chicago."

Redmond caught the words. "What's that about switched messages?" he asked. They turned toward him.

"Why," said the wire chief, "we had an odd happening on the line last night at Whittemore Lake, the station next west of here, between here and Chelsea, the most curious thing I have ever known in telegraphy. You see, there are a number of parallel wires running through here from Detroit to Chicago. Two of these wires run through two separate sets of instruments at Whittemore. The operator there last night unwittingly placed one of these patent envelopes, with the wire in the bottom by which to open it, across these two instruments in such a way as to transfer a passing message from its proper wire to the other and thus to a destination for which it was not intended."

Jack laughed. "That is curious," he said. "But how do you account for the receiving operator's failure to correct such an error?"

"That's the odd part of it, sir," returned the wire chief. "You see, it is certain that two messages were being sent simultaneously, one on wire No. 1, from Detroit for Chicago, and the other on wire No. 2 from Ann Arbor for Chelsea. The sending operators apparently concluded the addresses of their respective messages at the same moment. One was to a young woman at Chelsea, as our record shows, though she never received it, for her end of the wire was cut out by the accident; the other was for a Mr. John Redmond, of Chicago. At the exact moment when the senders concluded the addresses of their messages, the operator at Whittemore, all unconscious of the consequences of his simple act, laid this envelope, with its harmless but wonderfully potential little wire, across the keys. The wire in the envelope caught the cur-

rent and just transferred the Chelsea message to the Chicago address. The young woman at Chelsea received no message, for her end of the wire was dead. Mr. Redmond, if he got her telegram, received a summons to Ann Arbor intended for the girl. We do not yet know that Mr. Redmond received the message."

Jack took a yellow envelope from his pocket and examined it critically. "Yes," he said dryly, "he got it."

The two men looked at him interestedly.

"You, sir?" asked the operator.

Jack nodded.

"I hope it did not make trouble for you, sir."

"No," returned Jack, smiling again, "but it wonderfully changed the plans of the young lady who sent the message to Chelsea."

Redmond put the yellow envelope once more into his pocket, lighted a cigar and nodded good-night to the men.

"Good-natured for a man who has had a run of two hundred and fifty miles on a false summons," said the operator as Jack closed the door.

"Yes, he's good-natured enough about it," returned his superior. "But wait till the girl hears about it. It'll be different then."

"Yes, there'll be the deuce to pay then," said the operator.

But he was wrong. There wasn't.

The Master's Curse.*

BY HENRY ADELBERT THOMPSON.

"PARKINSON and Eastman are having it out to-night."

I looked at my host inquiringly, quite failing to comprehend the meaning of his remark. We were seated in what he called his library, a snug room, given over as much to guns, fishing tackle and boxes of cigars as to books. The mistress of the mansion, a most gracious, well-poised and handsome lady, just past middle age, had said good-night soon after dinner. We had pushed our chairs back into the shadows to escape the heat of a fire of pine logs which, piled high on the andirons of the wide fireplace, were blazing furiously. Outside, a roaring gale beat upon the old-fashioned, rambling house, rattled at the windows, howled in the corners, shouted down the chimneys. All day long the wind, which arose before dawn, had steadily increased in violence, driving great banks of low-hanging clouds in upon the land and tearing the surface of the Chesapeake to shreds of spray. At nightfall, instead of abating as usual, the wind grew angrier; and, at times, the house literally trembled, as if frightened by its attacks.

The Honorable William Walker, my host, was an old country lawyer, with whom, at one time, I had been associated in some troublesome and tedious litigation before the Supreme Court of the United States. He was a leonine sort of man, with a great mane of white hair continually falling down over his eyes. Since the beginning of our acquaintance he had not failed, each November, sending me an invitation to his home, on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, for a week's duck shooting. This was the first time I had been able, by accepting his hospitality, to renew my friendship with a remarkable man.

"I beg pardon," said Mr. Walker, "I overlooked the fact that

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you are — naturally — unfamiliar with our provincial way of putting things. I meant, merely, that a great storm is driving in, from the west, across the bay."

"Please tell me the story," I said.

"You wouldn't believe it if I did," replied my host. "You are saturated with the skepticism which pervades the atmosphere of Washington. There, at the Capital, they have faith in no person or thing — God or Satan."

"I believe in both," I asseverated, hastening to disclaim alliance with such infidelity.

"Then I will tell you the origin of the saying, 'Parkinson and Eastman are having it out to-night.'

"Many years ago, when I was a young man, Commodore Parkinson was a great, domineering person, who, for a half-century, had ruled his house, servants and sailors with the undisputed authority of a despot. Everyone called him Commodore because, as I fancy, much of his large fortune was invested in schooners, trading up and down the Bay and to the West Indies. He lived at Pungoteegue, two miles down the beach from here, in an immense, Colonial house, built so close to the water that the tide, when the wind helped it, rose inside the paling about his lawn.

"The Commodore never had children of his own. After the death of his wife, however, he adopted the daughter of a distant relative, who grew into one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen. Margaret Parkinson was a toast that brought all men to their feet, up and down the Shore, a generation ago. But, in spite of the adulation showered upon her, her disposition was simplicity itself. She did not seem in the least affected either by the sense of her personal charm or by the prospect of becoming a great heiress; for it was generally understood that her foster father purposed leaving his entire possessions to his adopted daughter.

"It is unnecessary to say that the Commodore's relatives, by marriage, regarded Margaret with definite disapproval; but the old man held their opinions in supreme disdain. But one person could claim blood kindred with him — Calvert Eastman, the son of his only sister. There was really not much to be said for Eastman. From a puny, cowardly boy he grew up into a tall, thin-

chested, cadaverous man, with shifting eyes and a tendency to whine. I saw a lot of the fellow in those days. He was a lawyer, and his office was just across the street from mine. I never liked or trusted him. The Commodore always despised him; and after Eastman, in his unctuous, sneaking way, courted Margaret Parkinson — although he was sent to the right about in cavalier fashion — the old man simply hated his nephew, and raged, like a trapped lion, whenever his name was mentioned.

"I was the Commodore's legal adviser; and for years kept dinging away at him to make his will, but could never quite prevail over his procrastination. He seemed, like many other men, to entertain the superstitious notion that executing one's will was equivalent to signing one's death warrant. 'Bless my soul, Walker,' he used to say, 'you're on the last will and testament business again. Do I look as though I was about to give up the ghost? All in due time, my son. My father lived to ninety-four, and my grandfather passed his eighty-seventh mile-stone. We Parkinsons are tough. It's hard to kill us. Still, that document ought to be drawn up and deposited in your safe. The next time we get together we will attend to it.' When the next time came, my client would exhibit an equal disinclination to reduce his testamentary wishes to writing.

"When Commodore Parkinson, in his sixty-fourth year — after cursing the captain of a dismantled schooner for allowing his masts to be blown overboard — was stricken with paralysis, I was in Richmond, pleading a case before the state Supreme Court. The sailors on the vessel carried their helpless master from the wharf to the house. Though hardly able to move, something of the characteristic dominance of the man remained; and when he brokenly insisted that he wanted a lawyer to draw his will, a neighbor volunteered to bring me. Finding that I was away, the messenger, as the most feasible thing under the circumstances, secured the services of Calvert Eastman.

"The servants who were in attendance when the attorney entered the room where the Commodore lay — the doctor had not yet arrived, and Margaret was on a visit in Richmond — afterwards told me that the old man swore roundly at his nephew, and ordered him out of the house. When, however, it was explained

that I was absent from home and would not return for several days, he accepted the situation; and Eastman, producing writing materials and seating himself at a table, asked his uncle to state what disposition he wished to make of his property. The Commodore lay with closed eyes for a few moments. Then, by an almost superhuman effort of will, he managed to raise himself to a half-sitting posture, and, glaring at his nephew, pronounced such a strange, weird imprecation — half curse, half threat — that the servants moaned in fear, and the housekeeper, not entirely an ignorant woman, declared that every word of it was burned into her brain and that she shuddered every time it was recalled to her memory.

"'Calvert,' said Commodore Parkinson, his voice vibrant with intensity, 'you know I despise you. I believe you would lie or cheat or be up to any devilment that would put a dollar into your rapacious pocket. I didn't send for you to write my will; but, since you are here, and Walker is not, you must do it. Let me tell you though, before you begin, that if you don't set down exactly what I say, you will wish you had. I know I'm going to die; but I will come back after you; I will kill you; I will follow you even after you are dead; damn you, if you deceive me, I'll chase you through all eternity!'

"After this outburst, which Eastman received in silence, the old man grew quite calm, and proceeded to dictate the terms of his will. They were very simple. A number of bequests were made to old family servants; then he directed that the entire remainder of his estate, real and personal, should go to his adopted daughter, Margaret Parkinson, and that 'The family attorney, his esteemed friend, William Walker,' should be the executor.

"The housekeeper noticed that the Commodore, during the strain of dictating his wishes, weakened rapidly. When he had finished, he was quite exhausted, and lay still, with a deathlike pallor on his face and his eyes closed. Eastman, no doubt, was keenly aware of his uncle's prostrated condition, and took advantage of it to insert a clause in the document he was preparing. This insertion provided that the whole of the Commodore's estate should go to Margaret Parkinson, contingent upon her marrying Calvert Eastman within a year; otherwise, should the testatrix

fail to obey the testator in this particular, the entire property should 'revert to the testator's beloved nephew, Calvert Eastman.'

"It was a bold play, one worthy of a higher type of villain, and Eastman carried it through successfully. When the finished will was placed in the Commodore's hands, the old man's eyes had weakened past the possibility of reading for himself. This task the attorney undertook for his uncle, enunciating aloud the prolix, legal verbiage, inseparable from all such papers in those days.

"'Oh, damn that verbose nonsense, broke in the Commodore, testily, 'Have you carried out my wishes exactly, without subtraction or addition?'

"'Yes, sir; I have; to the last infinitesimal. This testament devises just what you have demanded, and only that,' replied the lawyer, lying glibly and unequivocally.

"'Then let me sign it, quickly.'

"The pen was placed in his hand, the almost inert body raised a little, and Commodore Parkinson managed to scrawl his name. Two of the white servants signed as witnesses.

"'Now take that will to the county seat, and place it on file," said the sick man. 'My steward will pay you a fee of a hundred dollars. Get out!'

"Eastman stuffed the paper into his pocket and left the house. Commodore Parkinson lay back on his pillow a moment. Then his face contorted in a sudden spasm, his great frame stiffened, and then relaxed again slowly in the limpness of death. The strain had brought on a second stroke of paralysis, which had been instantly fatal.

"On the next day but one — Margaret Parkinson and I having both arrived in the meantime — the Commodore was buried in the family graveyard, a picketed enclosure, located very near the edge of the water and not above five hundred feet north of the house. It is one of our Virginia peculiarities that we wish to bury our dead in soil which belongs to us — and belonged to them.

"On the second succeeding afternoon — having, in the meantime, visited the registrar's office and examined the Commodore's will — I started for the Parkinson place, with the embarrassing duty in prospect of telling Margaret that she must marry Calvert Eastman within the year or find herself penniless. It was a cold,

raw, gusty November day, with a drizzling rain blowing in from the southeast. The early darkness fell before I had accomplished half the ten miles distance; but my horse was sure-footed, and I pressed on at a moderately rapid pace. The lights of the Parkinson mansion were just visible through the gloom, when Cricket suddenly shied, bounding to the side of the road with an unexpectedness that nearly unseated me. I recovered my poise in the saddle, spoke soothingly to the mare, shook the reins and gently urged her forward; but she stood stock still, with high-tossed head, inhaling great breaths of air, each one of which was followed by a terrified snort and an accession of trembling. For some moments I continued the contest, but only succeeded in coaxing Cricket to advance a few feet. Suddenly the mare stopped dead still and stiffened to rigidity; then, quick as a flash, she reared, whirled on her hind legs as on a pivot, and would have bolted had I not brought her up with a firm hand. Realizing that there was probably some good reason for such an extreme display of fear by an animal usually courageous, I dismounted, tied my horse to the fence and went forward to investigate. The darkness, owing to the fog and clouds, had become so intense that I was obliged literally to feel my way, sometimes groping with extended hands for a possible broken-down wagon, and again thrusting the toe of a riding-boot ahead lest I should stumble over something lying on the ground. After advancing in this slow fashion for some thirty paces, my foot encountered something. I stooped and felt it with my hands, and thrills of horror, like closing, icy fingers, gripped my heart. It was the body of a man, lying directly across the road. Fumbling for my match box, I found it and struck a lucifer. The wind extinguished the flame almost instantly, but the momentary glow enabled me to recognize the white, distorted, upturned face of the dead man. It was Calvert Eastman!

"Hastily, and with an immense distaste for the task, I dragged the body to the side of the road and laid it on the turf. Then, leading Cricket past the place, I mounted and galloped to the house, where my pale countenance and discomposed manner instantly showed Margaret that something was wrong. When informed of my gruesome discovery on the highway, the girl was evidently shocked by the news, but maintained her quiet demeanor. She

told me that her cousin — so she called him — had spent the greater part of the afternoon at the mansion and had left just after dark. She had parted with him at the parlor door and, a few moments later, had heard the hoofs of his horse pounding on the oyster shells of the driveway.

"Accompanied by several negroes, with lanterns and an improvised stretcher, I returned to the scene of the accident. An examination of the marks in the road, made as carefully as the wind-blown lights would allow, enabled me to determine the history of the occurrence. Eastman's mount had reared, lost his balance, fallen backward upon his rider and broken the man's neck; after which the horse, probably unhurt, had scrambled to his feet and ran away. What had frightened the animal is a mystery that has remained unsolved until this day. Of course the negroes and ignorant white people had their superstitions aroused and readily explained the matter on supernatural grounds."

My host paused and gazed meditatively at the fire. Outside, the wind continued to howl dismally, as though a fight between two monstrous demons had progressed to the point where, being in pain, they were giving tongue.

"We carried the body of Calvert Eastman to the house," resumed Mr. Walker, "and laid it in the long drawing-room — the same room from which the corpse of Commodore Parkinson had been so recently borne. It was useless to think of securing the services of an undertaker that night, so we composed the form of the dead man as decently as possible, arranging the rain-soaked garments and removing the clinging mud from his face. The housekeeper assisted me in these simple duties. The woman was strangely excited — almost distraught. Over and over again, as she moved about, I heard her mutter to herself, 'It's the Master's curse! It's the Master's curse!' Perhaps it was the woman's manner as well as the words she uttered, but something chilling seemed to creep slowly out of the darkness behind me and to touch me in a soft, enfolding, horribly disagreeable way. U-g-h! I remember it yet.

"As soon as our unpleasant task was finished, I was glad enough to abandon the society of the dead for that of the living. I found

Margaret in the sitting-room across the hall. She was seated before a leaping, open fire, the glow of which was very grateful to me at the moment. I drew a chair forward, and we talked for some time in low tones. Our theme was, of course, the accident which had resulted in Eastman's death; and I told her how, in my opinion, it had occurred. It did not seem advisable, just then, to raise the question of how it would affect her own fortunes.

"An hour of this and other conversation passed rapidly. The genial light of the fire and the calm, sensible temperament of my companion, combined to revive my sombre spirits. I even ventured an occasional smile and a few subdued pleasantries; for, after all, the dead man across the hall was nothing to me.

"Suddenly Margaret lifted her hand. I heard a crash in a distant part of the house, and immediately became aware that the storm had increased to a gale. Windows were rattling, shutters were banging, and the voices of the negroes, calling to one another in the quarters, were blurred to an indistinguishable murmur in the shrieking of the wind. But storms were no unusual things in the experience either of Margaret or myself, and we paid only casual attention to the accelerating commotion until, a quarter of an hour later, Scipio, the old family butler, peered in at the door and said, 'Miss Mahgret, de water's a poahin' in de cellah.'"

"'What!' I cried, rising and crossing to a window overlooking the Bay. The shutter, for some moments, resisted my efforts, but I finally opened it. An astonishing sight greeted me. The moon had risen; and, though it was not visible, it lent a soft glow to the darkness. The lawn, running down from the front of the house to the beach, had disappeared. It was merely a sheet of tossing waves, which, even as I looked, began to dash and break against the walls of the building. Knowing something of the Bay, I realized that this was unprecedented. The incoming tide, driven by the gale, was at least four or five feet above the highest water marks in the neighborhood, and was still rising. I called to Margaret to come and look, at the same time assuring her that there was not the slightest reason for apprehension. It was impossible that the water should rise high enough to damage the solid, massive, stone house, though it would probably flood the cellar. I suggested that we go to the kitchen and see how the negroes were

faring. We found the entire colony from the quarters huddled about the big fire, the women greatly excited and volubly talking, the men covering their alarm with smirks and grins. As we returned through the main hall of the house I noticed that water was beginning to enter beneath the front door. Telling Margaret to go into the sitting room, I ran back to the kitchen and ordered Left-handed Sam, who was a fairly good boat builder, to bring the necessary materials and caulk the crack between the door and the sill.

"Sam insisted on going to his cabin for the blunt-edged chisel and some oakum pickings, without which, he averred, he could not 'chink' the cracks effectively. I watched him as he waded toward the quarters. The water had completely surrounded the house but, here at the back, owing to the upward slope of the ground, it was not more than knee deep. Immediately at my feet, where it was protected by the building, it was comparatively calm, but to right and left it was being torn to shreds by the furious wind. The force of the gale had, if such a thing were possible, doubled in a quarter of an hour.

"Sam was absent only a few minutes. On his return we repaired, with two other of the men, to the front hall. The housekeeper was there, making ineffective efforts to stay the inrush of the water, which was now spurting in a sheet beneath the door. I told the woman to stand aside, and let Sam see what could be done.

"At that moment some heavy, floating object was hurled against the door with a crash which threatened to splinter the thick, oaken panels. Sam, with his 'pickin's' in one hand and the caulking iron in the other, paused and waited. Almost immediately a second impact came, and I really thought the door would fly inward from its hinges, so tremendous was the force of the wave. 'Marse Walker,' said the negro, 'hit ain't no sort'er use chinkin' dis doah if hit's goin' ter be bus' open by dat log.'

"The truth of the observation was obvious, but I was loath to send any of the men around to the front of the house, to grapple with the log and steer it to a place of safety, fearing they would run the double risk of being drowned and of having their brains dashed out by any floating thing that might chance to strike them in the darkness. On the other hand, I

knew what damage a floating log or beam might do the house when hurled by such a storm. It would be a veritable and powerful battering ram. A third crash emphasized the necessity of doing something at once.

"'Marse Walker,' said Sam, as I hesitated, 'reckon we'uns 'ud better open de doah an' let dat log come right in de hall. Better hab hit lyin' quiet in heah dan knockin' de house ter pieces.'

"'Of course, Sam,' I assented, comprehending the feasibility of the plan. 'You and Bill stand behind the door, ready to close it again. Jim, you grab the log, if it happens to jam in the doorway, and drag it inside. Now!"

"The door swung open, almost hurling the two men off their feet, as they attempted to check its slamming. A blinding dash of spray and a deluge of water burst through the aperture. Then, gliding down the inner slope of a wave which bore it, a horrible, oblong, black thing was carried into the hall and thrown crashing on the floor.

"Jim, the younger negro, fairly screamed with terror. Sam went down on his knees and began to pray. The housekeeper gave one look, cried out in a terrible voice, 'The Master's curse!' and fell in a dead faint. I ran to the sitting room door and held it shut. Margaret was fumbling with the knob on the other side. 'Go away! Go away!' I cried. 'You must not come out here just now. Promise me that you will not try to do so!' Something in my tones must have convinced her that I meant precisely what I said, for she promised readily enough, and I heard her moving away, across the room.

"I shook my fist menacingly at Jim, seized Sam by the collar, jerked him unceremoniously to his feet and whispered my orders. Fortunately the instinct of obedience in the negroes overcame, for the moment, their superstitious fears. Together we lifted the splintered coffin of Commodore Parkinson and carried it into the drawing-room, where we set it down beside the body of Calvert Eastman.

"'Gord-a-mighty!' I heard Left-handed Sam mutter to himself, 'Ole Marse come ter git him, laik he say he would!'

"I think that is all the story," continued my host, after pausing to fill his pipe. "It was, of course, impossible to keep the strange

experiences of that night from the public, and it instantly became a popularly accepted theory that the old Commodore, in pursuance of his threat, had killed Eastman on the highway and had then, summoning wind and wave to aid him, left his grave and floated back to his house in order to keep at close quarters with his enemy. The body had really been washed out of the grave by the high tide, which surpassed all previous records in that neighborhood. Soon, when an unusually violent storm was blowing, people began to say, 'Parkinson and Eastman are having it out to-night.'"

"A strange story," I remarked, "and one which, barring the element of the supernatural, it would be difficult to explain."

"One of the advantages possessed by educated people," returned Mr. Walker, "is that they do not feel under the intellectual necessity of explaining all things. They are content to contemplate a coincidence simply as a coincidence — a mystery simply as a mystery."

"What became of the Commodore's estate?" I asked, purely professional in my interest.

"It went to Margaret under the terms of the will, Eastman's relatives contesting her rights. They set up the claim that, as no marriage had taken place between Calvert Eastman and Margaret Parkinson within a year from the execution of the testament, the estate reverted to Eastman and through him to his legal heirs. The Court, however, held that the failure to comply with the terms of the will must be attributed to Eastman, there being nothing which showed that Margaret had not stood ready to fulfil the Commodore's wishes whenever called upon to do so; and that, under those circumstances, she should not be made to suffer for Eastman's default. It is a decision which will repay your reading. You will find it in the Eleventh Volume of the Virginia Reports."

"And what became of Margaret Parkinson?" I asked.

"She has been Mrs. William Walker for a little more than thirty-six years now."

"Pshaw!" I ejaculated, "I might have anticipated that."

A Little Transaction in Real Estate.*

BY ALEXANDER RICKETTS.

EARHART was busily engaged in calculating the stresses for a new steel bridge he was designing when Rackstraw unceremoniously burst into his office. Jim Gearhart hates to be disturbed when wrapped up in complicated computations like that, so he scowled viciously as he jerked up his head to see what all kinds of idiot had dared do it, but one look at the other's face checked the angry words upon his lips.

"Why, old man, what's shaken your nerve like this?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm having a terrible time out where I live, a terrible time," replied Rackstraw, wiping the clammy sweat from his forehead with fingers that trembled so he could hardly hold his handkerchief.

"All suburbanites do, according to the papers," laughed Gearhart.

"But this is really awful, awful," insisted Rackstraw. "I can't keep a servant on the place, my wife's on the verge of hysterics, the children scream at the slightest sound, thinking it's an ogre coming to devour them, and you can see for yourself what a nervous wreck I am. So I've come to you as a last hope, Jim. For God's sake, don't disappoint me. If you can't furnish some rational explanation of the strangest, most mysterious affliction ever happened to a man, I'll go raving crazy — I and all my family."

"What is it?" asked Gearhart, curiously.

"My house won't stand still. It turns and twists around to all points of the compass like a weather-vane," replied Rackstraw, solemnly. "Either that, or else the whole landscape slides and slithers around it, irresponsibly."

"What?" ejaculated Gearhart, eyeing the other carefully.

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"Oh, I knew you wouldn't believe it. Last week I wouldn't have believed such a thing possible myself. I can hardly believe it's so now sitting here quietly telling about it. But as I am a living man it is true," asserted Rackstraw, vehemently. "It began Sunday night. We went to bed as usual that night, nothing disturbed us, but in the morning we found that, instead of facing the road as it always had, the house had swung clear around and was facing directly away from it. We couldn't believe our eyes, but it was so. The next morning it faced up the road, the next down the road, and this morning it again faces the road. And there's no violence or noise about it; there's just a slight lifting sensation, and then the house swings around and sinks down again, leaving you sick and dizzy and bewildered. The servants all left at once, claiming it is bewitched, my wife and children are scared almost out of their wits, and you have no idea what a dreadful feeling of insecurity it gives you. Nothing seems firm and stable any more. Why, every time I put my foot down I half expect this old earth of ours to bring up with a jolt and begin whirling around the other way."

"See here, Rackstraw, are you sure you haven't got 'em?" demanded Gearhart, with an incredulous smile.

"Would all my family have 'em, would the servants have 'em?" cried Rackstraw, hotly. "Why, I made the last payment on the seventy-five hundred I gave for the place only last week, but I'll sell it now for the five hundred. I'll give it away or abandon it if you can't discover what agency, human or superhuman, is spinning it around with the ease I would a top. Come on out there with me now, old chap, and see for yourself, won't you?"

"I will," said Gearhart, convinced at last that there must be some foundation for the other's extraordinary story, and keenly curious to investigate it for himself as well as for his friend's peace of mind.

As they drove up to the house he carefully noted it and its surroundings. It stood some little distance from the rest of the village, on a somewhat unfrequented road, from which all but the roof was hidden by a clump of trees. The house itself was a small suburban villa such as are frequently built by speculators for sale, perfectly square in shape, though this was concealed to some ex-

tent by the bow-windows and porches with which it was adorned. What struck Gearhart at once as singular about it was that instead of being placed in or near the centre of the grounds it had been built far over at one side, standing only some ten or a dozen feet from the line fence. He also noted that close up to the fence on its other side stood a long story-and-a-half building that looked as though it might be a stable. No other building was in sight.

"Oh, no," explained Rackstraw, replying to his questions; "that's a sort of carpenter and machine shop belonging to Mr. Ryder. He's the man I bought of, you know, and dabbles around a little as an amateur mechanic. His house is behind that grove of maples. He built this house over on one side so that whoever bought it could sell off some of the grounds in building lots if he wanted to. Real thoughtful of him, I think, though if I'd built it myself I'd have had it nearer the middle."

It was easy for Gearhart to see for himself under what a terrible strain the whole family was living. Their faces were pinched and drawn and their eyes watchful and they shivered and shrank timorously at the slightest noise. Twice during dinner Mrs. Rackstraw, starting at some sound, dropped a dish, and each time at the crash the children fled shrieking and cowering to their father. It was a most dismal meal, and Gearhart was glad to escape from it on the plea of examining the house.

This he did thoroughly, as thoroughly as possible by lamplight, from cellar to attic, but nothing unusual rewarded his efforts. It was simply the ordinary country cottage, four rooms and butler's pantry on the first floor, four bed-rooms and bath-room on the second, and servant's rooms and cistern in the attic.

"Where do you get your water and gas?" he asked, upon seeing the cistern.

"There isn't any gas in the house; the company's mains don't reach this far," explained Rackstraw. "The water we pump into this cistern from a spring behind the house, but the connection is broken now, of course."

There was just one point in the construction of the house that struck Gearhart as a trifle unusual. In the cellar, instead of partitions or rows of piers, the structure was supported by a single large brick pier, exactly under the centre of it; and this deter-

mined him where he would spend the night. Carefully closing every opening from which a ray of light might escape, he began his watch.

It was not until the early hours of the morning, however, that his vigilance proved fruitful. Then the whole house noiselessly rose some three or four inches from the foundations and slowly began to swing around. Breathlessly Gearhart examined that central pier for perhaps five seconds; then, extinguishing his lamp, he let himself out, and rapidly but noiselessly slipped across to the fence, vaulted it, and crept to the front of the building on the other side.

When he started he had no other thought than to investigate an idea which had suddenly flashed upon him, and, if it proved the solution of the mystery, to return the next night with due precaution; but when he felt the door of the building yield under his hand, he threw caution to the winds, and snatching his revolver from his pocket, stepped boldly inside. A rapid glance around the room dimly illuminated by a lantern assured him that he was alone with a short, stocky man, who was just pulling on his coat.

"Ah, good morning, Mr. Ryder," said Gearhart, pleasantly.

The other man faced about with a convulsive jerk, turned a beautiful mottled green, and paused with his hands stuck half way in the sleeves of his coat.

"Sorry to disturb you," continued Gearhart, playing carelessly but ostentatiously with his revolver, "but I wish you'd just step over to Rackstraw's with me and explain what a tremendous lifting power one man can exert with an hydraulic jack."

At that instant that gentleman himself bolted in through the open door a shot-gun in one hand and an ice-pick, held daggerwise, in the other.

"Saw you go this way — thought I'd come help," he panted to Gearhart. "Why, Ryder, that you? What the deuce!"

"Yes," said Gearhart, "it's your neighbor Ryder, and also the *human* agency that has caused all your suffering."

With a dreadful cry of hate and horror Rackstraw sprang towards Ryder, and it was only by his utmost exertions that Gearhart prevented him from then and there venting his wrath upon the shrinking rascal.

Now thoroughly cowed, Ryder explained the workings of his machinery to them. The house was in reality a steel frame, supported entirely by the first floor, which was also the platform of an hydraulic jack, the piston running down through, and being concealed by, the central pier in the cellar which had excited Gearhart's suspicions. The other cylinder of the jack, with the lever by which it was operated, was concealed in the workshop, where, by an ingenious system of weights, he could at any time raise the house clear of its foundations. Then by a system of multiplying gearing, the mechanism of which ran under the cellar floor, he could swing the whole house around into any position desired.

"Exactly," said Gearhart, as he finished his explanation. "But what was your object in going to all the expense the construction of this thing cost you just to harass Rackstraw?"

"Oh, it wasn't him particularly. The — the one secret of wealth is to sell dear and buy cheap," said Ryder, with a sickly grin.

"You mean that you planned this arrangement solely for the purpose of selling this place for a fair market figure and then deliberately frightening your victims into selling it back to you for a little or nothing?" queried Gearhart, slowly. "And you were sure they would never tell simply because the story was so wild and improbable they knew no one would believe it?"

Ryder nodded a sullen assent.

"And how often have you been successful?"

"Only four times so far."

"And how much have you made each time?"

"I — I can't say exactly."

"On the average?"

"Well, maybe four or five thousand," replied Ryder, reluctantly.

"Four fives is twenty," said Gearhart quietly, "and the original purchase money makes it twenty-seven, five hundred. Mr. Ryder, you are going to buy it back once more, but not at your own figure. Kindly draw a check for twenty-seven thousand five hundred dollars to J. C. Rackstraw's order."

"What!" gasped Ryder, turning pale.

"Oh, come, I'm not going to gouge the man like that, if he is an infernal scoundrel," protested Rackstraw.

"Yes, you are," said Gearhart, positively. "I happen to know

he can well afford it, and it's the only way to touch his heart and show him the error of his ways. By the way, I forgot my fee as a mechanical engineer for examining this ingenious machine. Mr. Ryder, before you leave this shop Mr. Rackstraw is going to cash your check for exactly thirty thousand dollars. I don't know whether the law could adequately reach such a pitiful scoundrel as you are or not, but I do know that you don't care particularly for any great publicity about this, so I intend to collect Rackstraw's damages and my fee right now. Your deed for the property will be ready for you to-morrow. Here's a blank check, change it to your bank, thirty thousand is the amount, and I wouldn't take long to make up my mind if I were you, for from now on until the check is in Rackstraw's hands for collection our time is worth just one thousand dollars every five minutes."

For perhaps two minutes the trio gazed into each other's eyes, Ryder imploringly, Gearhart inflexibly, and Rackstraw inanely. Then, with a sigh that came from his soul, Ryder reluctantly drew a fountain pen from his pocket.

Padgett's Reedville Quartette.*

BY LLOYD DORSEY WILLIS.

HOSTLY mists had begun to swing lazily across the marsh, touching here and there a reed which reared its tasseled head above its fellows. Before them, drifting shadows crept eastward like the rising tide. In the distance a Great Heron lumbered upward from the hidden lake, and beat its way clumsily through the air until lost to view.

As though it were vespers signal for the marsh frogs, a rambling chant slowly gathered volume. It swelled into a chorus and soon swallowed all other noises of the night in a grand wave of sound which reverberated back and forth between the black forests, circling like giant sounding-boards upon either side of the marsh. The sound waves rose and fell like the breathing of surf. Once, in a lull, a single voice, deep and rolling, left the others and sounded several sonorous notes, as though leading the chant.

The old resident had been listening for that. He laid his hand suddenly upon the visitor's shoulder and whispered eagerly, "You heard it?"

His companion nodded.

"'That's the last of the 'Reedville Quartette,'" said the old resident, as he rested his arms upon the top rail of the little causeway, and settled his pipestem comfortably in the drooping corner of his mouth.

"I know his voice all right. I'd know it in a thousand. That's Bill, the basso, out there.

"You surely must have heard of 'Padgett's Reedville Quartette'? Why, man, the fame of that little band spread for miles around and there's few in this part of the Eastern Shore who haven't heard it sing.

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"When old Abe Padgett came from down East to live in Reedville, he brought with him about the most complete menagerie that was ever seen about these parts. Joe Bigbee, who hauled his things from the river landing, said as how he felt like he was bringing a three-ring circus to town. His monkey was educated better than some of the folks who laughed at it, and the parrots could say about anything they wanted to. There was a ciphering pig and two white rats that could play on the pianner — a real little one, you know, about as big as a harmonica.

"Padgett had a mania for training animals, and the more difficult they were to handle the better he liked it. He had been with a circus most all his life, but had become too old for the road, and had come to Reedville to wait around until time to shuffle off the coil.

"He had no connections that I ever heard of, although he did used to say that the monkey was a sort of cousin of his. He certainly treated it as good as if it had been a blood relation. It ate at the table and, I believe, slept in the same bed with its master.

"Well, Padgett and his animal family settled down at the old Rutherford place, over there where you see that light at the end of the marsh. They lived happily for a while, and then disaster overtook them. The marsh ain't said to be the healthiest place on earth, — at least, it ain't especially recommended by the doctors, and has never been advertised as a health resort. The climate, or maybe the malaria, proved too much for the menagerie, and one by one a little row of graves over on the brow of that hill marked the resting place of Padgett's friends.

"The old man was all broken up by his loss. The neighbors offered him other pets — cats and dogs; but he didn't take any shine to them at all. He said they were too commonplace, that anybody could teach tricks to domestic animals. He wanted to train something that no one else had ever attempted. Altogether he was very peevish, and took to roaming barefoot about the marsh morning and night. He used to sit around, about this time in the evening, listening to the croaking of the frogs, which, I take it, are probably more numerous about here than any other place in Maryland. At any rate, they make more noise.

"It was while Padgett was listening to the marsh chorus one evening that he suddenly conceived an idea. He called it an inspiration, and began to perk up right away. After this he was away from home more than ever. When occasionally a visitor would drop in, a lusty halloo would bring Padgett splashing from the marsh, muddy and wet from head to foot, but looking as happy as a twelve-year-old schoolboy on Friday evening. He always carried a net and a closed basket during his prowls, and some of his neighbors wanted to know if he was going to start a frog farm.

"Along in the middle of summer it was noticed that all of the best frog music was over on Padgett's shore. There was still some musical croaking at other parts of the marsh, but it sounded weaker than before, and was usually drowned out by the melodious chorus from Padgett's. Just before this the old man had enclosed about an eighth of an acre of marsh with net wire at the base of his lawn. After the first speculation as to what Abe was up to, the neighbors lost all interest in the old man and his secret work.

"One by one his few friends ceased to visit him. His place was off the main road, and a hermit could not have been more alone. Ray Slocum, the miller's son, sprung a sensation about the postoffice one day by saying that he had been up by Padgett's the evening before and had heard a band playing somewhere around there, and had seen the old man jumping around the yard waving his arms like mad, but saying not a word. Someone suggested that the place was haunted and that its proprietor was out of his head.

"Curiosity began to get keyed up pretty high when one morning Padgett marched up to the postoffice and asked for his mail. He hadn't been there since the ciphering pig died. There was quite a number of letters, but Padgett paid little attention to them, shoved them carelessly down in the tail of his coat and said to Perkins, the postmaster, 'I would like to rent your hall for next Saturday night, as I want to give a concert there which will kinder shake up Reedville a bit, I reckon, the idee being new an' original.'

"Perkins and he fixed it up between them, and Padgett billed the town that same afternoon. The posters were short, homemade, and to the point. As near as I can remember, they

stated that the concert would be the greatest novelty of the age, and that imported musicians would render all the familiar airs and many that were not so familiar. Ten cents admission would be charged. It is needless to say these posters created a sensation. Reedville had not listened to a concert since the village band of five pieces had marched off to join the Yankee forces away back in the sixties. It had never marched home again, and music in Reedville was practically dead. There were only a few who remembered the concerts that the old band used to give over by the village pump.

"None doubted that old man Padgett would have the finest talent to be secured at his concert, for he was a man of the world and of the circus. Every Saturday night the farmers from miles around came to Reedville to buy their weekly necessaries and to talk over the crops, the weather, and a few other things.

"This Saturday night the whole countryside turned out, and Perkins' Hall was packed to the doors. Ed Mills took care of the door receipts. He had a hatful. A rude stage and curtain had been rigged up at one end of the room.

"'I haven't seen no musicianer fellows roamin' 'roun' town,' said Si Lewis, as he spat reflectively out of a window.

"There was a rustle of expectation through the hall as the curtain stirred uneasily. It swung softly back, disclosing what looked like a section of marsh, framed in by the three walls of the stage. Water could be seen at the base of the reeds, shimmering in the lamplight. A faint evening breeze drifted in and stirred the tops of the reeds and grass.

"A thrill of surprise swept through the assemblage. What was this? Where were the musicians? Could they be hiding in the grasses?

"Padgett did not give them chance to wonder long. Stepping to the front of the stage, a large bass viol beneath his arm, he signalled Ed Mills to put out the lights.

"'Do not be frightened,' he said, as the audience stirred uneasily at the darkness.

"A hush fell upon the gathering.

"Through the open windows came indistinctly the ceaseless chorus from the marsh. Suddenly Padgett sent a rumbling, long-drawn note from the viol echoing through the hall.

"As if in answer, a deep bass 'pud-er-unk' sprang into life from the bosom of the miniature marsh upon the stage. Another voice, somewhat higher, took up the note and carried it on a rising scale to another and yet another. The last was a metallic, though recognizable, imitation of the tenor.

"Again Padgett drew his bow and softly drifted into the strains of 'I Want to be an Angel.' With increasing volume, the voices in the reeds followed the familiar tune. They were harmonious and, though not exactly like anything ever heard on a stage before, blended pleasingly to the ear.

"The audience was spell-bound. 'Frogs!' they whispered. And then, in awed silence, sat with open mouths, drinking in the sounds which came uninterruptedly from the direction of the stage.

"Like a performer picking out the simple tune with one finger on an organ, the unseen singers piped in to fill out the notes suited to their voices. The viol supplied the bars they couldn't reach. True, some of the musicians, especially the piping tenor, couldn't hold the notes as could the deep basso, but each was clear and ringing, and seemed to show a certain amount of training.

"After the first few bars, it was noticed that the straggling chorus from the marsh outside dwindled into a few spasmodic croaks and finally ceased.

"Not a sound could be heard except the insistent strains of the hymn. As the last notes died away there was the shuffling of feet which precedes applause. Padgett neatly checked the threatening noise by suddenly swinging into 'Maryland, My Maryland,' with his four-voiced choir following, so to speak, at his heels. Again the awed silence. Without pause, tune after tune was rendered. The singers seemed to be carried away with a sort of professional enthusiasm. Along toward the end of 'Baby Mine' (the singing had lasted an hour now) the baritone's voice broke a little. At the end of the bar, Padgett ran his fingers half-way down the strings and gave a sudden, fierce lunge to his bow. The viol screeched wildly, discordantly. The singers seemed to bite their notes off and swallow them.

"There were four quick plunges into the water, and little waves lapped over the tank on to the stage. The lights were on, as if

by magic, and a wild cheer went up. The old hall shook from end to end, and seemed ready to tumble down with the strain.

"Eight shining eyes glared wildly at the lights from the water-line among the reeds, and four little brains wondered what manner of giant fire-flies those could be which glared at them so wickedly.

"Well, Padgett's fame was made. From that time on he was looked upon as the cutest man about these parts. For miles around, the countrymen would drive over to hear the frog-quartette sing. They would only perform at night, when everything was quiet. Mostly on Sunday evenings there would be a special concert at Padgett's. With pardonable pride, the old man would tell his visitors how he labored for weeks in the marsh, selecting just the right voices for his little band; how he had been disappointed time and again, and had tried out at least a thousand frogs before he had been suited. His greatest trouble, he said, was in teaching the frogs the theory of music, and when they should chime in to fill up the notes required of them.

"The quartette was as healthy a looking bunch of frogs as I ever saw, but one of them, Tim, the tenor, died suddenly one day late in the summer. I think he swallowed a young water snake and it poisoned him. The blow almost broke Padgett's heart, and affected the other members of the band some too, I guess.

"The other three still performed at times, but it was hard to get in all the fine notes without Tim. They were ambitious, Sam, the second tenor, more than any, and it proved his undoing. One night, in trying to scale a high note which before had been carried off easily by Tim, something in Sam's throat snapped. He was so cut up about the loss of his voice that he hopped away one night and joined his family in the marsh.

"Ben, the baritone, and Bill, the basso, quarreled, and never again could be induced to sing together, so they were turned loose. Ben sang alone for a while over at the far end of the marsh.

"One night his voice was missed. A Bittern, which had waded there the day before, might have told where it was, but he didn't. There is no leader now but Bill."

The chorus rolled on, keeping time to the plaintive notes of a Whip-poor-will.

Suddenly the old resident whistled sharply. Like a ship checked by a giant wave, the melody ceased and then rolled on again as Bill, the basso, boomed forth his interrupted cry, a challenge to any who should doubt his right to lead the marsh chorus of Reedville.

Did You Ever Know

That Improper Food Often Causes the Liquor Habit?

It's a great proposition to get rid of a taste for liquor by changing food.

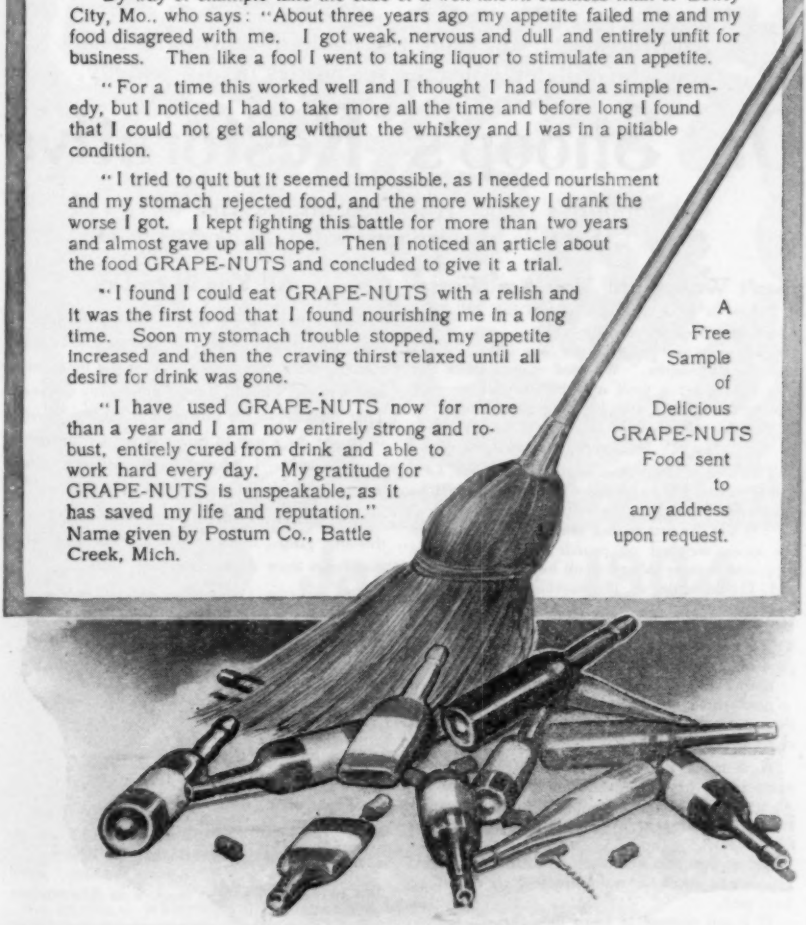
Improper food and stimulants like coffee and tea create unnatural appetites. The one who eats only proper food is normal in health and therefore normal in appetite.

By way of example take the case of a well-known business man of Lowry City, Mo., who says: "About three years ago my appetite failed me and my food disagreed with me. I got weak, nervous and dull and entirely unfit for business. Then like a fool I went to taking liquor to stimulate an appetite.

"For a time this worked well and I thought I had found a simple remedy, but I noticed I had to take more all the time and before long I found that I could not get along without the whiskey and I was in a pitiable condition.

"I tried to quit but it seemed impossible, as I needed nourishment and my stomach rejected food, and the more whiskey I drank the worse I got. I kept fighting this battle for more than two years and almost gave up all hope. Then I noticed an article about the food GRAPE-NUTS and concluded to give it a trial.

"I found I could eat GRAPE-NUTS with a relish and it was the first food that I found nourishing me in a long time. Soon my stomach trouble stopped, my appetite increased and then the craving thirst relaxed until all desire for drink was gone.

"I have used GRAPE-NUTS now for more than a year and I am now entirely strong and robust, entirely cured from drink and able to work hard every day. My gratitude for GRAPE-NUTS is unspeakable, as it has saved my life and reputation." Name given by Postum Co., Battle Creek, Mich.

A Free Sample of Delicious GRAPE-NUTS Food sent to any address upon request.